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SUBJECT: Aceh: Official Campaign Season Begins

1. (SBU) Begin Summary: Official campaigning began in Aceh on November 24, although advertisements for some candidates have been up for weeks, giving a slight advantage to well-financed candidates. GAM "Prime Minister Malik Mahmud returned to Aceh to try to reunify the GAM movement and to voice support for candidates Humam Hamid and Hasbi Abdullah. Some GAM officials disparage this support and back rival candidates Irawandi Yusuf and Muhammad Nazar. During a campaign appearance in Bireuen, Hamid's motorcade came under a stone-throwing attack, most likely by Yusuf's supporters. Despite this, all groups, including the police and political parties, agree that Americans and other foreigners working in or observing elections in Bireuen would be perfectly safe.

End Summary.

Campaigns Begin

2. (U) Electoral officials have designated November 24 - December 7 as the official campaign period. Outside of those dates, candidates are not permitted to display banners or posters or give public speeches. While the restrictions on advertising have been largely ignored, restrictions on public appearances and rallies were strictly enforced: electoral officials even prohibited non-partisan NGOs from organizing a series of debates among the candidates. Many candidates, particularly those running as independents, have complained that this restriction hurts them disproportionately because it does not give them sufficient time to educate voters about their positions. Even during the campaign period, candidates will only be allowed to hold public rallies according to schedules set by local election committees to minimize the likelihood of clashes between rival groups.

3. (SBU) The cost of banners, flags, and posters is a major campaign expense and is roughly indicative of how well a campaign is financed. Preliminary counts indicate that the three leading pairs of candidates, Humam Hamid/Hasbi Abdullah, Azwar Abubakar/Nasir Djamil, and Malek Raden/Fuad Zakaria, have substantially more campaign materials distributed throughout the province than the other candidates. By contrast, the team Irawandi Yusuf and Muhammad Nazar have virtually no campaign materials. They recently confessed to us that they do not have the funding

needed to cover the province with banners and that they were going to rely on name recognition, GAM affiliation, and person-to-person contact to build support.

14. (SBU) To set themselves apart, independent candidates from GAM make a point of wearing native Acehese dress and never wearing the black, flat hat favored by virtually all other candidates in the province. Observers also point out that Malek Raden looks so much younger and more handsome in his photographs than in real life that some critics mockingly suggest he used a stand in.

15. (SBU) Where does the campaign money come from? Hamid (United Development Party, PPP) told us that his campaign is supported primarily by a group of well-known Acehese whom he declined to name. Other sources tell us that some of his most important supporters are affluent ethnic Chinese businesses in Aceh who are interested in moderate Islam and a conducive business environment. Abubakar from the National Mandate Party (PAN) is paired with a candidate from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Well before the election was scheduled, it was widely reported that PKS announced that it would only pair with a candidate who could bring significant financial support to the campaign. Consistent with this, Abubakar has told us that he is funding his campaign himself. His detractors say that much of his wealth was acquired while he was vice governor to the notoriously corrupt and now imprisoned Abdulleh Puteh. Malik Raden's campaign is reportedly financed through a combination of his own resources and Acehese who favor strong ties with Jakarta. Rumors abound that Raden is "Jakarta's candidate" and that senior figures in the capital are providing financial assistance as well.

JAKARTA 00013305 002 OF 002

The "Prime Minister" returns to Aceh

16. (SBU) GAM 'Prime Minister' Malik Mahmud and 'Foreign Minister' Zaini Abdullah have returned to Aceh for what they say will be a one-month visit. Although they deny participating in the political campaign, politics is a big part of their agenda. So far, they have held meetings with GAM members and supporters in Langsa, Lhokseumawe, and Bireuen. At each stop they have tried to unify the increasingly divided GAM movement and have encouraged their followers to support Humam Hamid and Hasbi Abdullah (referred to as H20) in the upcoming elections. Generating support within GAM for H20 has not been an easy sell, in part because neither Hamid nor Hasbi was a formal GAM member. By contrast, rival candidate Irwandi Yusuf was a GAM member and, prior to announcing his candidacy for governor, represented GAM in the Joint Forum and on the Commission on Security Arrangements (CoSA).

17. (SBU) Several senior GAM commanders, including Zakaria Saman and Muzakkir Manaf, have told us that they are supporting H20 and have publicly encouraged GAM members to do the same. In private, however, Manaf appears uncomfortable with GAM's endorsement of H20. Some other GAM leaders, however, openly favor Irwandi. One GAM commander in Lhokseumawe, for example, told us that by endorsing H20 over a real GAM leader and by refusing to return permanently to Aceh, GAM leaders in Sweden have forfeited their right to lead the movement. The future of GAM, he said, is "in Aceh, not Sweden," and that is where Acehese should look for leadership.

Leading Gubernatorial Candidate Attacked

18. (SBU) At approximately 5:00 pm on Wednesday, November 22 in Bireuen, vehicles carrying Humam Hamid and several of his supporters were attacked by a stone-throwing mob. Although no one was seriously hurt, several vehicles were severely damaged. The attack appears to have been carried out by a group supporting Irwandi Yusuf's campaign for governor. We

spoke with several of Irwandi's supporters in Bireuen who, while not admitting to carrying out the assault, did not deny it either. They said this incident should be a lesson to Hamid to stay out of Bireuen.

19. (SBU) Earlier this month there was another incident in Bireuen where several of Hamid's supporters were beaten by a group of Irwandi's supporters. Although the regent and the police chief have both pledged to ensure that similar incidents do not happen again, the police chief confided in us that there is so much resentment against Hamid among rank and file GAM members in his district that he was not certain he could prevent low-level clashes in the future. Americans and other foreigners, he said, would be perfectly safe.
Pascoe